

Scuba NIGHTMARE

By LCpl. John Hoellwarth

The scene at Okinawa's Suragaki Beach was peaceful. Twenty feet beneath the placid waves, however, a Marine was fighting to save his friend's life.

Lance Corporal Benjamin Juico and Corporal David B. Kaggwa had gone recreational scuba diving. They snorkeled 300 meters from the beach before they began diving. About 60 feet deep, Cpl. Kaggwa started having trouble breathing. Soon, LCpl. Juico heard a high-pitched hissing noise coming from Cpl. Kaggwa's gear, so the two surfaced to fix the problem. They stayed afloat about a half-hour, then started their final dive 45 feet below the waves.

Five minutes later, LCpl. Juico again heard the hissing sound and turned toward Cpl. Kaggwa, who was snorkeling about 15 feet behind him. He swam to the imperiled diver, who held his breath as LCpl. Juico checked the oxygen valve. It appeared to be working fine. By the time LCpl. Juico could offer his secondary-breathing apparatus, Cpl. Kaggwa had been without air for a considerable amount of time.

Panic-stricken, Cpl. Kaggwa grabbed both air hoses on LCpl. Juico's scuba gear, which left him without air. LCpl. Juico immediately took off his weight belt and inflated his buoyancy vest. Meanwhile, Cpl.



Kaggwa continued clinging to LCpl. Juico's air hoses, making it difficult for the two divers to ascend. At 30 feet, LCpl. Juico's vision began to blur.

"I thought we both were going to die," he said, "so I swam to the surface, swallowing seawater en route. When I got there, I gasped for air, coughed up water, fixed my goggles, and deflated my vest so I could swim back to Cpl. Kaggwa."



Photo by LCpl. John Hoellwarth

Cpl. David B. Kaggwa (left) and LCpl. Benjamin Juico, both of MEU Service Support Group-31, inspect their diving equipment at a beach near their barracks aboard Camp Kinser, Okinawa.

By now, the imperiled diver was about 20 feet below the surface, feverishly waving his arms in an attempt to ascend. LCpl. Juico descended toward his friend, grabbed him, and started pulling him to the surface. Because Cpl. Kaggwa was foaming at the mouth, LCpl. Juico inflated his buoyancy-control device and tilted Cpl. Kaggwa's head with his arms. He was pale and unconscious.

"When we reached the surface, I screamed for help with every ounce of strength I could muster," said LCpl. Juico. "I was praying aloud that God would let my friend live. I shook his head, but he didn't respond.

"As I swam, I performed mouth-to-mouth

resuscitation. After the second or third try, he began breathing, and I realized there was hope. Every breath that struggled its way in or out of my friend's lungs, however, created a sound that told me he had a lot of water in his airways."

LCpl. Juico moved Cpl. Kaggwa's head to one side so he could cough out some of the water, which was foamy and mixed with blood. LCpl. Juico continued the

first aid and kept calling for help while working to get his friend ashore.

One time during this ordeal, Cpl. Kaggwa opened his eyes, then slipped back into unconsciousness. When he finally became alert, he yelled, "Take me back!"

"I've got you, man," said LCpl. Juico. "We're going back, he added, as he kept washing away the foam from Cpl. Kaggwa's mouth."

"I dragged him for what seemed like a mile or more," said LCpl. Juico. "I couldn't really tell how far it was because I was fighting the current and becoming exhausted. I kept talking to him and praying aloud that the Lord would give me strength. I was crying because I didn't want to lose my friend. Cpl. Kaggwa kept telling me his head was hurting, he had pain in his chest, and he felt very tired. I kept reassuring him everything was going to be OK."

About 50 meters from shore, LCpl. Juico saw a Japanese family and yelled, "Tasukete!" the Japanese word meaning, "Help!" The family immediately called an ambulance, and a man swam up to the two Marines with a life buoy.

Once ashore, LCpl. Juico laid his friend on the beach and took off his diving gear. The ambulance arrived about four minutes later and took both divers to the emergency room at Camp Lester Hospital.

"I told several doctors and nurses what had happened in detail," said LCpl. Juico. "They told me I had saved his life, but I somehow felt responsible for the incident. I hoped I had done enough, because I wanted my friend to live more than anything else in the world."

LCpl. Juico's water-safety skills are no accident. They're part of every safety briefing in Marine Expeditionary Unit Service Support Group 31, 31st MEU, which is the unit to which he and his friend belong. 🌊